DO NOT LOOK AWAY

When Our Government Bombs Children — and What We Owe Them With Our Voice

A book for residents of continuing care communities

Mel Haas

CivicGoodBooks

Do Not Look Away

When Our Government Bombs Children — and What We Owe Them With Our Voice
The children are waiting. Not for a hero. Just for someone who refuses to look away.

Mel Haas and Perplexity Pro
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On February 28, 2026, it was a Saturday morning in Minab, Iran. Parents had just walked their daughters to school — the

Shajareh Tayyebeh Elementary School, a girls' school. The children were between the ages of six and eleven. Classes had just begun.

At approximately 10:45 in the morning, a Tomahawk cruise missile — the kind fired from U.S. Navy ships — struck the school building, reducing it to rubble.

At least 120 children were killed. Many more were injured. Parents who had dropped their daughters off minutes earlier rushed back through the smoke and dust to dig through the concrete with their hands.

The U.S. military said it was under investigation. President Trump, when asked, said: "Nobody did that on purpose." Then he said he thought Iran had done it. Then his defense secretary said U.S. forces had "authorities granted by the President and yours truly."

Four months later, no one has been held accountable. The Pentagon's own inspector general found that the office responsible for preventing civilian deaths had been quietly dismantled. The report of the investigation has not been released. The families of the dead children are still waiting.

Those children had names. They had backpacks. They had homework due that day.

This book is about what we — comfortable, safe, aging Americans — owe them with our voice.

Contents

A Note Before We Begin 5
Part I — Waking Up in the Comfort Zone 6
The Morning the Children Went to School 6
What just happened in that room? 9
The Ordinary Machinery of Looking Away 9
Why This, Why Now 11
What Our Silence Does to Us 13
The Other Side of the Ledger 14
When Our Silence Hurts Our Neighbors 16
Part II — The Children: What Is Happening Right Now 19
One Child Every Hour 20
Our Country's Hand 23
My President, My Money, My Silence 24
What We Owe Our Children and Grandchildren 28
Part III — Why We Go Numb 31
"I've Earned My Rest" — When Comfort Becomes a Trap 31
Fear, Fatigue, and the Feeling That Nothing Will Change 33
Systems That Prefer Us Quiet 35
Part IV — Choosing a Different Old Age 36
Reclaiming Your Moral Voice 36
Small Acts, Real Power — A Toolkit for Every Capacity Level 38
If you have five minutes 39
If you have thirty minutes 39
If you have more capacity 40
If you are limited by illness or mobility 40
Building a Culture of Courage in Our Community 40
Living With a Lighter Conscience 42

Conclusions 44
Recommendations 46
For individual residents 46
For communities 46
For families of residents 47
For community leadership 47
For all of us 47

A Note Before We Begin

This book opens where the emergency actually is: with children being killed right now by American bombs, paid for by American tax dollars, ordered by the current administration in the name of the American people, which is to say, in your name and mine.

I want to be clear from the first page that this is not a partisan argument, and I will not let it become one. It is a humanitarian emergency, and the witnesses are not political operatives. They are UNICEF, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the United Nations, the Pentagon's own inspector general — and the parents who dug through rubble for their children with their hands. All of this is happening while we watch television, eat dinner, and quietly decide whether to care.

So this book does not appeal to law, and it does not preach from scripture. It appeals to something older and more basic than either: the gut feeling that every person alive carries — the one

that said this is wrong the instant we first heard of a child pulled from the ruins. That feeling did not arrive by statute or by sermon. It came from somewhere deeper — from how we were raised, from what we know in our bones about being human, from the plain memory of holding a child of our own.

I write as a fellow resident of a continuing care community, a fellow elder, a fellow member of the human family. I have not come to scold you. I have come to confess my own temptation to look away — and to invite you, in whatever time we have left, into a different way of living out these years.

The book asks one question, and it asks it of me as much as of you: When we know, and we stay silent, what does that make us?

Part I — Waking Up in the Comfort Zone

These chapters begin within our own community, with our own daily experience, and gently pull back the curtain

to reveal what is happening beyond its walls.

The Morning the Children Went to School

> ***The chapter's question: What just happened in this room?***

It was an ordinary Saturday morning. In Minab, a town in southern Iran, the sun was up, the streets were warming, and the doors of the Shajareh Tayyebeh Elementary School stood open. Girls between the ages of six and eleven arrived the way children

arrive everywhere — some skipping, some dragging their feet, one clutching a parent's hand for a last moment before letting go. Backpacks. Lunches. A homework assignment due that day. The parents turned and walked back into the ordinary business of their lives, expecting, as parents always expect, to see their daughters again at noon.[1]

At approximately 10:45, a Tomahawk cruise missile — the kind fired from United States Navy ships — struck the school. The building came down. At least 120 children were killed, and many more were injured. Parents who had dropped their daughters off minutes earlier came running back through the smoke, tearing at concrete with their bare hands.[2][3]

I want you to feel how close this is. This is not a chapter about history. There is no comfortable distance here — no black-and-white photograph, no faded newsreel, no “back in those days” to hold it at arm's length. This happened recently. It happened to children who would be alive today. And it happened at the end of

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[1] Minab school bombing: how the worst mass casualty event of the Iran war unfolded, The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2026/mar/03/minab-school-bombing-how-the-worst-mass-casualty-event-of-the-iran-war-unfolded-a-visual-guide

[2] More Than 100 School Children Were Killed in Iran; Evidence Points to a US Missile, Time. https://time.com/article/2026/03/11/iran-school-strike-minab-tomahawk/

[3] At least 80 children dead as missile reportedly hits school in southern Iran, The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/feb/28/children-dead-as-missile-hits-elementary-school-in-southern-iran

a chain of decisions that leads, whether we wish it or not, back to our own country — and therefore back to us.[4]

The response of the United States government is part of the story. First, there was deflection. President Trump, asked about the strike, said, "Nobody did that on purpose." Then he suggested Iran itself had done it. When footage emerged that appeared to show a U.S. missile, his position shifted again: "Mistakes happen, that's war." Months later, pressed at a press conference, he said, "That's such a strange question to be asked today, you're talking about a time ago." The investigation report has not been released. No one has been held accountable.[5][6]

Weeks before the school was destroyed, the Secretary of Defense had boasted that American warfighters now operated with "authorities granted by the President and yours truly," and that he had swept away what he called "stupid rules of engagement." The safeguards were gone, on purpose, by design.[7]

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[4] USA: Four months after horrific Minab school airstrike, accountability delayed, Amnesty International. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/06/usa-four-months-after-horrific-minab-school-airstrike-accountability-delayed/

[5] Four months after the Iran school bombing, fears grow that Trump and Hegseth will bury the truth, The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jun/21/iran-school-bombing-minab-fears-trump-hegseth-bury-truth-investigation-findings

[6] US Tomahawk struck Iranian base next to school destroyed in strike, CNN. https://www.cnn.com/2026/03/09/middleeast/iran-minab-school-airstrike-new-footage-intl

[7] Pentagon quietly shut legally required program to prevent civilian deaths, The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/may/15/pentagon-civilian-death-program

Now walk with me back into the room where you and I live. The television is on in the lounge. The news mentions the school — briefly, wedged between a weather segment and a celebrity story. Someone glances up. “How awful,” they murmur. And then a hand reaches for the remote, the channel changes, and the room settles back into its comfortable hum. Dinner is at five. Cards are at seven. The morning in Minab is over, for us, in less time than it takes to butter a roll.

What just happened in that room?

Something did happen. A door opened for a moment — a door onto the suffering of real children —, and it was closed again, quickly, almost automatically, by people who are not cruel, who would never harm a child, who consider themselves decent and kind. That closing of the door is the subject of this book. It has a name.

The Ordinary Machinery of Looking Away

Psychologists call it moral disengagement — the quiet, ordinary, almost automatic process by which people who genuinely believe in right and wrong find ways to keep wrong from reaching them. It is not the same as cruelty. It is not hatred. It is not the intent to do harm. It is subtler and, for that reason, more dangerous: it is the set of small mental moves that lets a good person witness terrible things and remain undisturbed. We tell ourselves it is not our responsibility. We tell ourselves nothing can be done. We tell

ourselves the reports are exaggerated, or that the other side is worse, or that we simply cannot bear to look. Each move is small. Together, they build a wall.[8]

There is a famous account of this. In 1961, the political thinker Hannah Arendt sat in a courtroom in Jerusalem and watched Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi official who had organized the transport of millions of Jews to the death camps. She expected a monster. Instead she found a mediocre, unremarkable bureaucrat — a man who followed orders, filled out forms, and, above all, had stopped thinking about what he was actually doing. She called what she saw "the banality of evil": the capacity of ordinary people to enable atrocity not because they are evil, but because they have stopped thinking carefully about what they are doing and what is being done in their name.[9][10]

Let me be clear about what I am not saying. I am not calling you a Nazi. I am not comparing a retiree changing a television channel to a man who dispatched trains to Auschwitz. The scale is not the same, and the guilt is not the same. But the mechanism — the stopping of thought, the turning away, the letting the machinery run without asking where it is going — the mechanism is worth

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[8] Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities, Albert Bandura. https://www.antoniocasella.eu/nume/Bandura_1999.pdf

[9] Arendt Speculates on the Banality of Evil, EBSCO Research Starters. https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/arendt-speculates-banality-evil

[10] Hannah Arendt On Standing Up to the Banality of Evil, Philosophy Break. https://philosophybreak.com/articles/hannah-arendt-on-standing-up-to-the-banality-of-evil/

recognizing in ourselves. Arendt's point was never that Eichmann was uniquely wicked. Her point, far more unsettling, was that the capacity to look away lives in ordinary people. In you. In me.[11]

Recognizing that mechanism is the first act of resistance. That is all this chapter asks of you: to notice the moment your own hand reaches for the remote, and to ask, just once, what is happening in the room.

Why This, Why Now

There is a reason this book begins with the Minab school and not with an abstract principle. The killing of children is not a hypothetical to be debated in a philosophy seminar. It is happening, in our time, with weapons our country built and money our country spent.

- The Minab school attack is real, recent, documented, and traceable to decisions made by the current administration.[12][13]
- The Trump administration's bombing campaign in Yemen — Operation Rough Rider — killed in fifty-three days nearly as many civilians as the previous twenty-three years of U.S.

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[11] The banality of evil: When ordinary people commit atrocities, The Citizen. https://www.thecitizen.co.tz/tanzania/oped/the-banality-of-evil-when-ordinary-people-commit-atrocities-5286386

strikes in Yemen combined. Children were among the dead within the first hours.[14][15]

- The Pentagon's civilian harm prevention office — required by federal law — was quietly dismantled, eliminating the very safeguards designed to prevent this kind of killing.[16][17]

Doing nothing in response to this is not neutrality. In a democracy, silence in the face of what is done in your name is a form of consent. That is not a moral opinion; it is a description of

[14] Trump's Yemen bombings killed nearly as many civilians as 23 previous years of US attacks, The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jun/18/trump-yemen-bombings-killed-civilians-us-attacks-analysis

[15] Yemen Data Project — civilian casualty analysis. https://yemendataproject.org

[17] DOD to gut office for reducing civilian harm, Defense Media Activity. https://slite.dma.mil/issues/mar2025/20250306.pdf

how power reads a quiet public. This book is my attempt — and, I hope, ours — to withdraw that consent.

What Our Silence Does to Us

> ***Core question: Why do I feel the way I feel when I change the channel?***

In the last chapter, I asked you to notice the moment your hand reaches for the remote. Now I want to ask what that moment costs — not the children this time, but you. Because it does cost you. And I suspect that, somewhere beneath the comfortable hum, you already know it.

There is a phenomenon that researchers first studied in combat veterans and called moral injury. It began as a way to describe what happened to soldiers who had witnessed or taken part in acts of killing that violated their own deepest sense of right and wrong. But over the years, clinicians came to understand that moral injury is not limited to soldiers. It can happen to anyone whose actions or deliberate inactions betray their own values. It is a wound to the conscience: a persistent, low-grade suffering that

shows up as depression, shame, a sense of being somehow false, a loss of meaning.[18][19]

Here is what makes it hard to see. Moral injury often goes unnamed for years. People call it fatigue. They call it sadness. They call it aging — "I just don't have the energy I used to," "Nothing seems to matter the way it did." But sometimes what we are calling age is actually conscience, speaking in the only language the body has left when the mind has refused to listen. The vague guilt. The three-in-the-morning heaviness. The sense that one's life has quietly shrunk to a size that no longer fits the person one used to be.[20][21]

I am not saying every ache of late life is a moral wound. Grief is real. Illness is real. But I am saying that not all of it is what we think it is, and that some of the weight many of us carry is the weight of things we have watched and said nothing about.

The Other Side of the Ledger

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[18] Moral injury in modern warfare: clinical reflections, Frontiers in Psychiatry. https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychiatry/articles/10.3389/fpsyt.2026.1738799/full

[19] Moral injury as a psychological and ethical phenomenon, Mukherjee (Academia.edu). https://www.academia.edu/165865206/Moral_injury_mukherjee

[20] A narrative thematic analysis of moral injury in combat veterans, PMC. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6215519/

[21] Recontextualising moral injury among military veterans, Wiley. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/casp.2643

Now here is the part that surprised me, and may surprise you. The research not only tells us that suppressing conscience harms us. It tells us, with real force, that engagement heals.

A study using nationally representative data from more than five thousand adults found that higher civic engagement is significantly associated with lower loneliness and better self-rated health. Research across European welfare systems found that civic participation is not a byproduct of well-being but a cause of it — that people who take part in the life of their society are, measurably, better off. Studies of volunteering among older adults consistently find that being useful to others creates a sense of being needed and valued, and that this sense of purpose is linked to health and to a longer life.[22][23][24]

Read that again, because it overturns something we tell ourselves. We tend to think of caring about the world's suffering as a burden — a weight we take on, an energy expense we can no longer afford. The evidence points the other way. Caring, and acting on that caring even in small ways, is associated with more energy, more connection, more health, more life.

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[22] Examining Civic Engagement and Well-Being in Later Life, PMC/NIH. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12763639/

[23] Civic Participation as a Promoter of Well-Being, PMC. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9186013/

[24] Volunteerism, health, and civic engagement among older adults, PubMed. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19416800/

So the choice this book asks you to make is not, in the end, a choice between rest and sacrifice. It is a choice between a comfort that quietly costs you something you cannot name — and an engagement that restores your sense of being fully, morally alive.

- Moral injury is real, and it is not only a soldier's affliction. Anyone who acts, or fails to act, against their own values is vulnerable to it.[2526]
- The low-grade depression, the vague guilt, the sense that life has become too small — these are often the symptoms of a suppressed conscience, not simply of age.[27]
- Civic engagement in older adults is associated with better health, lower loneliness, longer life, and a stronger sense of purpose. This research is deep and consistent.[2829]
- The choice is between a comfort that costs you your peace, and an engagement that gives it back.

When Our Silence Hurts Our Neighbors

> ***Core question: Who in my own building is suffering because no one will speak?***

Before we go out to the wider world — to Yemen, to Gaza, to a school in Iran — I want to stay right here, in the building where you and I live. Because the habit of looking away does not begin overseas. It begins down the hall.

In every continuing care community, there are residents who cannot advocate for themselves. Some have cognitive decline and can no longer track what is happening to them. Some are limited by mobility and rarely leave their rooms. Some are simply isolated — no visitors, no allies, no one who notices when their care slips. And some have been quietly labeled "difficult" for the sin of having spoken up before, and now find that no one takes their concerns seriously. When those of us who are more capable choose not to engage, these neighbors lose their only advocates.

Silence sets the moral temperature of a whole community. When "pleasantness" becomes the highest value — when no one raises a hard question at the resident council, when a staff member's mistreatment goes unreported because we don't want to make trouble — the community becomes safer for whoever holds power and more dangerous for whoever is vulnerable. That is not a dramatic collapse. It is a slow, polite erosion, and it happens in pleasant places with good food and trimmed lawns.

Here is the connection I want you to see. The same psychological move that lets us look away from children dying in Yemen is the move that lets us look away from a neighbor being mistreated down the hall. These are not two separate habits. They are the same habit, practiced on different scales. A conscience trained to go numb before the television will be numb at the resident council, too.[3031]

Psychologists have a name for part of this: the bystander effect — the well-documented tendency for people not to act when they assume someone else will. It operates in cities and in retirement communities. “Surely someone has reported this.” “Surely the family knows.” “Surely it's being handled.” And so, because everyone assumes someone else will, no one does anything at all.[32]

The good news hidden inside this is that the reverse is also true. Choosing to be a moral presence in your own immediate community — honest, alert, willing to say one true sentence — is at once a direct service to a vulnerable neighbor and a kind of training for the larger citizenship this book is about. You practice

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[31] Bystander effect, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bystander_effect

courage where you live. Then it is available to you when the news comes on.

Research on ageism confirms what common sense suggests: when older adults are discouraged from engagement — when they are treated as if their voices no longer matter — both their own mental health and the overall quality of their community suffer. A community that silences its elders is not protecting them. It is diminishing everyone.[33]

- The bystander effect operates inside our communities exactly as it does in the wider world.[34]
- Moral disengagement practiced before a global atrocity does not stay contained to the global — it becomes our default way of operating everywhere.[35]
- Being a moral presence at home is both a service to vulnerable neighbors and a practice for the larger work.[36]

Part II — The Children: What Is Happening Right Now

[33] Older adults, perceived ageism, civic participation and mental health, Taylor & Francis. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13607863.2024.2348611

This is the humanitarian heart of the book. It names what is happening to children specifically — in Yemen, in Gaza, in Iran, in Sudan — with the United States directly or indirectly involved in all of them Sudan — with the United States directly or indirectly involved in all of them.

One Child Every Hour

> ***Core question: What does it mean that I know this and have not changed anything about my life?***

I am going to give you numbers in this chapter, and I am going to ask something of you before I do: do not let them become numbers. That is the danger of a large figure — it rounds the dead into a smooth gray total and lets us feel we have understood something when in fact we have only stopped seeing. Every figure below is a count of children. Each woke on the morning they died. Each ate something, wore something, feared something, loved someone. Each had a name that is still, tonight, being whispered by somebody who cannot sleep.

In 2024, the United Nations verified 41,370 grave violations against children in armed conflict worldwide — a twenty-five percent increase over 2023, which had itself been a record. Officials described 2024 as "one of the worst years in history for children in conflict." Then 2025 was worse: the UN documented

6,266 child fatalities in armed conflict globally, a thirty-four percent increase over the record year before it.[37][38]

In Gaza, more than 20,000 Palestinian children have been killed since October 2023 — an average of approximately one child every hour for nearly twenty-three months. At least 1,009 of those children were under one year old. Nearly 420 were newborns: born during the war and killed during the war, their entire lives contained inside it. A United Nations Commission of Inquiry released in June 2026 documented more than 20,179 children killed and 44,143 injured in Gaza between October 2023 and October 2025, and found evidence that Palestinian children had been deliberately targeted.[39][40][41]

In Yemen, the Trump administration's Operation Rough Rider, from March to May 2025, killed at least 238 civilians, including 24 children, and injured 31 more children — in fifty-three days,

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[37] 2024 'one of the worst years in history for children in conflict', UN News. https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/12/1158561

[38] Children endured an unconscionable number of grave violations in 2024, UN CAAC. https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/2025/06/22495-haunting-cries-children-affected-by-conflict-endured-an-unconscionable-number-of-grave-violations-in-2024/

[39] Gaza: 20,000 children killed in 23 months of war, Save the Children. https://www.savethechildren.net/news/gaza-20000-children-killed-23-months-war-more-one-child-killed-every-hour

[40] UN inquiry says 20,000 Palestinian children killed in targeted Gaza attacks, India Today. https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/palestinian-children-killed-gaza-un-inquiry-deliberate-israeli-attacks-ptag-2933484-2026-06-24

[41] Israel's deliberate targeting of Palestinian children (COI report), United Nations. https://www.un.org/unispal/document/coi-report-23jun26/

nearly matching the entire civilian death toll of the preceding twenty-three years of U.S. operations in the region.[4243]

In Sudan, a single paramilitary drone attack in December 2025 killed fifty people, thirty-three of them children — one incident among hundreds in a war the world has largely chosen not to see.[44]

In Iran, the U.S. airstrike on the Minab school on February 28, 2026, killed at least 120 children between the ages of six and eleven. And this is not an isolated aberration: Save the Children's 2025 global report found that explosive weapons are killing children "at a scale never seen before," with child casualties from explosives up forty-two percent from 2020.[454647]

I ask you to hold these not as statistics but as children. Not "20,000" but a boy who liked a certain song, a girl who was afraid of the dark, a baby who had learned to laugh three weeks before.

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[44] Sudanese paramilitary drone attack kills 50, including 33 children, OPB. https://www.opb.org/article/2025/12/06/sudanese-paramilitary-attack-kills-50-including-33-children/

[46] Explosive weapons caused record child deaths last year, Al Jazeera. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/11/20/explosive-weapons-caused-record-child-deaths-last-year-save-the-children

[47] Explosive Weapons Killing Children at Scale Never Seen Before, Save the Children UK. https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/news/media-centre/press-releases/2025/explosive-weapons-killing-children-scale-never-seen

Each number is a subtraction from the world of a person who cannot be replaced.

Our Country's Hand

It would be easier if all of this were happening far from us, done by others, with nothing of ours in it. It is not. Under the current administration, the United States has done the following:

- Carried out more than 1,000 airstrikes in Yemen between March 15 and April 29, 2025, alone.[48]
- Struck a port facility through which eighty percent of Yemen's humanitarian aid passes, killing 84 civilians, including three children.[49]
- Struck a migrant detention center, killing at least 68 people — an act Amnesty International said should be investigated as a war crime.[50]
- Struck a girls' school, killing 120 children, and then declined to release the investigation report.[51][52]

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[48] Yemen: US Strikes on Port an Apparent War Crime, Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/06/04/yemen-us-strikes-on-port-an-apparent-war-crime

[50] Amnesty calls for US strike on Yemen to be investigated as war crime, Al Jazeera. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/28/amnesty-calls-for-us-strike-on-yemen-to-be-investigated-as-war-crime

- Dismantled the Pentagon office legally required to prevent and respond to civilian casualties.[5354]
- Continued to supply weapons and diplomatic cover for military operations in Gaza.[5556]

These are not distant abstractions. They are the direct actions of the government that acts in the name of every American citizen — including every one of us, in every retirement community in the country. The question that titles this chapter is not rhetorical. What does it mean that we know this, and that nothing about our lives has changed?

My President, My Money, My Silence

> ***Core question: If someone kills a child in my name, with my money, and I say nothing — am I responsible?"***

This is the hardest chapter in the book, and I will not soften it — because to look away here, at the very center, would be to commit the exact sin this book is written against.

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[55] UN warns Israeli settlers could join blacklist for violations against children, Reuters. https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/un-warns-israeli-settlers-could-join-blacklist-violations-against-children-2026-06-17/

When President Trump announced the beginning of Operation Rough Rider on March 15, 2025, he posted on Truth Social that the Houthis would face "hell will rain down upon you like nothing you have ever seen before." Within forty-eight hours, UNICEF confirmed that children had been killed. The Pentagon denied civilian casualties. UNICEF contradicted the Pentagon directly, on the record. And the bombing continued.[57][58]

When the Minab school was struck, the President first said Iran had done it. When the evidence pointed to a U.S. Tomahawk missile, he said, "Mistakes happen, that's war." When asked about it four months later, he said, "That's such a strange question to be asked today, you're talking about a time ago." The findings have not been released. No one has been held accountable.[59][60]

The Secretary of Defense, shortly after the school bombing, boasted that American warfighters now have "authorities granted by the President and yours truly," and confirmed that he had

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[57] Houthis say children among 32 killed after US fighter jets bomb Yemen, Al Jazeera. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/15/us-launches-major-air-strikes-on-houthi-targets-in-yemen-at-least-9-killed

[58] UNICEF Says U.S. Attacks on Yemen Killed Civilians, Contradicting Pentagon, Democracy Now. https://www.democracynow.org/2025/3/18/headlines/unicef_says_us_attacks_on_yemen_killed_civilians_contradicting_pentagons_claims

eliminated what he called “stupid rules of engagement” — the very rules that existed to keep missiles away from schools.[6162]

Now, what does this have to do with you, sitting in a comfortable chair in Maryland, Ohio, or Arizona? Everything. This is a democracy. That word is not a decoration; it is a description of responsibility. The weapons were bought with public money — your tax money. The government that fired them holds power because citizens grant it. And the friction that keeps a democratic government within moral limits — the questions, the protests, the letters, the votes, the refusal to pretend not to see — that friction is supplied by citizens, or it is not supplied at all.

Hannah Arendt's insight, which we met in the first chapter, cuts to the center of it. Evil of this scale does not require monsters. It requires people who stop thinking — who accept official explanations without asking questions, who decide that “the government handles that” and turn back to their routine. In a democracy, that decision, repeated by millions, is itself a political

act. It tells the government it may proceed. It removes the friction. It is the grease on the machine.[6364]

I want to be careful and fair here, because this is where people stop listening. I am not asking whether you like President Trump. I am not asking you to adopt a party. Reasonable people disagree about taxes, about the border, about a hundred things, and this book takes no side in those quarrels. I am asking a much narrower and much older question. Do you believe children should be killed? If your answer is no — and I have never met the person whose answer was yes — then silence in the face of children being killed in your name is not consistent with what you believe. It is the gap between your values and your conduct. And that gap is exactly what moral injury is made of.

Research on citizen complicity and state violence finds, consistently, that governments are more likely to exceed moral and legal limits when they perceive that public accountability is low — when they judge that the people will not object. Our silence is not invisible to power. Power reads it, counts on it, and is emboldened by it.[65]

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[64] The Banality of Complicity: Arendt's Guide to Moral Resistance, Liberal Currents. https://www.liberalcurrents.com/the-banality-of-complicity-arendts-guide-to-moral-resistance-in-the-age-of-trump/

[65] An Apathetic Public: Dubik's Legitimacy Principle, West Point. https://athena.westpoint.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/7134f543-fea5-4ea7-822d-2d9f4008e9fc/content

- The administration's civilian death toll in Yemen in fifty-three days matched twenty-three years of prior operations — in full public view, with children's deaths reported in real time.[6667]
- The federally required civilian-harm office was deliberately dismantled — the safeguard against killing children was removed on purpose.[6869]
- Governments exceed moral limits when they perceive low public accountability. Silence is that low accountability.[70]
- This is not a question of whether you agree with the President's politics. It is a question of whether you agree that children should be killed. If not, silence is the wrong response.

What We Owe Our Children and Grandchildren

> ***Core question: When my grandchild asks what I did, what will I say?***

Let me bring this all the way home now — past the wider world, past the government, to your own kitchen table and the faces of the people you love most.

Every one of us who chooses not to engage in this moment is making a choice about the future. That is not sentimentality; it is arithmetic. Older Americans are among the most reliable voters in the country. Research shows that the civic engagement of elders shapes political outcomes and models civic values for the generations coming up behind them. When you vote, when you write, when you speak, you are not shouting into a void. You are one of the most listened-to voices in the electorate.[71][72]

So consider what it signals when millions of elders choose comfort over conscience. It tells political leaders that this demographic — large, active, carrying deep reserves of moral authority — has no objection to what is being done. That silence is read as approval. And approval, from a bloc that powerful, has consequences.

But I think the deeper reckoning is not political. It is the one that comes at the family dinner table. Picture it. A grandchild, older now, has learned in school or online about the wars of these years — about the school in Minab, about the children of Gaza. They

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[71] Does social capital enhance political participation in older adults?, PMC. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11473466/

[72] Fifty-Five Years of Research Into Older People's Civic Participation, The Gerontologist. https://academic.oup.com/gerontologist/article/60/1/e38/5393635

turn to you across the table, with the directness only the young still allow themselves, and they ask: "What did you do when they bombed that school?"

I am not going to shame you for the past. None of us has spoken up about everything we should have; I certainly have not. But this chapter is an invitation, not an indictment. It is an invitation to have something to say about the present — to be able to answer that grandchild honestly: "I noticed. I did not look away. I did what I could, small as it was. I wrote. I spoke. I refused to pretend it wasn't happening."

Legacy is not only what we leave in a will. It is the moral posture we modeled while we were alive — the example our children and grandchildren carry of what a decent person does when they are uncomfortable, afraid, and tired. The grandchildren who will inherit the world being made right now deserve to know that their elders were awake for it.[7374]

- Late-life civic engagement models active citizenship for younger generations and transmits civic values across families.[75]

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[74] Civic Participation in Early Adulthood and Midlife Well-being, PMC. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12413018/

- Elder voters hold enormous leverage — leverage that is surrendered by disengagement.
- Legacy is the moral posture we modeled while alive, not only what we leave behind.

Part III — Why We Go Numb

These chapters treat the causes of apathy with compassion — understanding why it happens, without excusing what it costs.

"I've Earned My Rest" — When Comfort Becomes a Trap

There is a sentence that ends more conversations than any other in a place like ours. It is said kindly, and it is meant to be final: "I've earned my rest." I want to take that sentence seriously, because it deserves to be — and then I want to ask you to look at it a little longer than we usually do.

And it is true. You have. A long life of work, of raising children, of paying taxes, of carrying burdens — that life has earned rest, and no one should begrudge it. Rest from labor is real, legitimate, and good. If this were a book about whether you deserve to put your feet up, I would close it here and agree with you.

But it is not. Because there is one thing that no human being, however old, however tired, however deserving, ever gets to retire from: conscience. The gut feeling that says this is wrong does not submit a retirement notice. It does not clock out at sixty-five, or eighty, or ninety. It stays awake even when we would rather it slept, and it is that wakefulness, more than any physical ailment, that visits us at three in the morning.

Gerontologists describe something called selective engagement: as people age, they naturally narrow their focus to the issues that feel most personally relevant. This is a normal, even healthy, adaptation — a way of conserving limited energy. But it is exactly the tendency that comfortable institutions and cynical political actors count on. When "personally relevant" shrinks to mean only your own health benefits and the dining room schedule, then everything else — including the killing of children — gets quietly filed under "not my problem."[76]

So I want to ask the question this chapter turns on, and I want to ask it gently, because I ask it of myself too: Is it actually restful to live with a suppressed conscience? Or does it only feel that way in the daylight — and then, in the quiet hour of the early morning, does the account come due?

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[76] Age Differences in Political Engagement: Role of Self-Relevance, PMC. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6846341/

Rest is your right. Moral indifference is not the same thing as rest. In fact, as the research on moral injury shows, indifference is often the opposite of rest — it is a low, grinding unrest that we have mistaken for the ordinary weariness of age. You have earned your rest. Do not let anyone trade you a counterfeit for it.

Fear, Fatigue, and the Feeling That Nothing Will Change

There are real reasons people go quiet, and I refuse to wave them away. This chapter is about distinguishing between real limits and the ones that only feel real.

The real limits deserve honor. Pain is real. Illness is real. Grief is real — and many of us are carrying fresh grief that the world does not see. Cognitive change is real, and so is the plain fact that stamina fades. Not every resident can do everything, and no one should be made to feel a failure for the body's true limits. I want to be absolutely clear about that before I say the next thing.

The next thing is this: “Nothing ever changes” is not a fact about the world. It is a feeling. And research shows it is a feeling most intense in isolated people who lack social connection and have absorbed a norm of passivity from the surrounding culture. When a community's whole atmosphere normalizes silence — when raising a concern is met with a change of subject and a tightening of smiles — residents come to feel powerless not because they are

powerless, but because the environment has patiently trained them to feel that way.[77][78]

Psychologists call the deeper version of this learned helplessness: the condition of a person who has been taught, through repeated experience, that their actions make no difference — and who therefore stops trying, even when circumstances change and their actions would, in fact, matter. The tragedy of learned helplessness is that it outlives the conditions that caused it. The cage door opens, and the animal, long since taught that the door never opens, does not walk out.

There is also a specific fear I must name, because it is real in communities like ours: the fear of retaliation. Speak up, and you might be labeled "the troublemaker." You might feel a chill from staff, or a cooling among neighbors who prefer the quiet. These fears are not imaginary, and I will not pretend they are. But I will say this, having watched it: residents almost always have far more power, and far less to lose, than they believe. You are not dependent on this institution for a career. You are not building a reputation you might damage. The very freedoms of late life — which we will come to in the next part — make the feared

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[77] Fifty-Five Years of Research Into Older People's Civic Participation, PMC. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12774630/

consequences smaller, and the possible good larger, than fear allows us to see.

Systems That Prefer Us Quiet

It is not all in our heads. Some of the pressure to stay silent comes from outside us, built into the systems we live inside — and it is important to name it, because a pressure you can see is a pressure you can resist. A pressure you mistake for your own good judgment rules you.

Many continuing care communities are owned by corporations, and corporations, by their nature, prize risk management and the reduction of complaints. A quiet resident is, from that vantage point, a well-behaved resident. The whole culture of group living leans toward "pleasantness" as the supreme virtue — and pleasantness, however nice it sounds, is often just another word for not making waves. Institutions with an interest in your passivity will reinforce, in a hundred small ways, the idea that a good resident is a quiet one.

I want to draw a parallel here that I find impossible to ignore. In the first chapters of this book, we saw that the Trump administration quietly dismantled the Pentagon's civilian harm prevention office — removing the institutional infrastructure designed to keep missiles away from schools. The same logic, at a vastly smaller and gentler scale, operates in our communities: institutions often remove or quietly starve the social infrastructure

that would support resident advocacy — the open forums, the real grievance channels, the genuine invitations to speak. Both kinds of systems run more smoothly when the people inside them stop asking hard questions. That is not a conspiracy. It is simply how institutions behave when no one insists otherwise.[7980]

Recognizing external pressure as external — rather than mistaking it for your own considered wisdom — is the first act of recovery. When you feel the pull toward silence, it is worth asking where the pull is coming from. Is it your conscience speaking? Or is it the culture of the building, the preference of the management, the ambient message that good residents don't rock the boat?

I will end this chapter, and this part of the book, with a single question. Carry it with you. Whenever you feel the pressure to say nothing, ask: Who benefits from my silence? The answer is almost never the children. And it is rarely you.

Part IV — Choosing a Different Old Age

Forward-looking, practical, and genuinely hopeful.

Reclaiming Your Moral Voice

We have spent three parts of this book looking at hard things. Now I want to turn toward the light, because there is real light here — and it is closer than you may think.

I want you to consider that late life is not only a season of decline. It is also, morally, a season of unusual freedom — and freedom is power. Consider what you have that a younger person does not. You are no longer building a career so that no boss can silence you with a threat to it. You are no longer dependent on an employer, so no paycheck holds your tongue. You are largely freed from the fears that keep younger people quiet on the hardest questions — the fear of being passed over, blacklisted, or ruined for speaking a truth out of season.

In moral terms, this is enormous. You are, many of you, in the rare position of a person who has nothing left to lose by telling the truth — and everything to gain: integrity, purpose, and, as the research keeps insisting, the tangible health benefits of living in alignment with your own values. Studies confirm that civic engagement in later life is associated with a greater sense of purpose, lower loneliness, better health, and a stronger sense of personal integrity. Residents who engage are not sacrificing their

comfort. They are recovering something they have been slowly, quietly losing.[818283]

There is an old word I want to reclaim for you: elder. Not as a soft euphemism for "old person," but in its original and far deeper sense — the one whose accumulated experience gives them the standing to speak, to witness, and to guide. In nearly every human culture that has lasted, the elder was the keeper of conscience, the one who could say to the powerful, "I have seen more than you, and this is wrong." That role has not disappeared. It has only been mislaid. It is available, right now, to every resident who chooses to pick it up.

You spent a lifetime earning the right to be believed. Do not let it go unused in the years when it matters most.

Small Acts, Real Power — A Toolkit for Every Capacity Level

This is the most practical chapter in the book, and I have built it so that no one is left out — not the tired, not the frail, not the fearful. Whatever your energy, mobility, or confidence, there is a first step here sized for you. You do not have to become an

activist. You only have to remain a moral person. And as the research keeps showing, even modest and regular engagement is tied to measurably better health among older adults. This is not a chapter of demands. It is a menu, and you may start wherever you can.[8485]

If you have five minutes

- Say out loud, to one person today: “I've been thinking about those children in the Minab school.” Breaking the silence in the room is itself an act.
- Write one sentence in a letter to your representative. A single honest sentence counts.
- Refuse to change the channel. Let the news reach you. Do not close the door.

If you have thirty minutes

- Write or call your congressional representative about civilian harm in U.S. military operations. Scripts are available through advocacy organizations, and tools like Perplexity can help you find the right contact and the right words.
- Read one of the Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch reports on Yemen or Minab, and share a single finding with a family member.

- Raise one question about U.S. foreign policy at your next resident council meeting.

If you have more capacity

- Start a conscience circle: a small, regular group that reads, discusses, and occasionally takes collective action.
- Write a letter to the editor. Your age and your standing in the community give that letter unusual authority.
- Contact a local congregation or peace organization and ask how residents can take part.
- Support younger advocates with your experience, your networks, and your moral endorsement.

If you are limited by illness or mobility

- Witness. Pay attention. Refuse to look away. This is not a small thing — it is the root of everything else.
- Share what you know with every family member who visits.
- Ask questions — of staff, of visitors, of fellow residents. A question is a form of engagement, and it can be asked from a chair or a bed.

The point is not to exhaust yourself. The point is to move, in whatever way your life allows, from awareness to response — and to gain, in the moving, the health and wholeness that the evidence says comes with it.

Building a Culture of Courage in Our Community

One person who refuses to look away is a light. A few people who refuse together can change the weather of an entire building. This chapter is about that second thing — how a small group of committed residents can shift the moral climate of a whole community, not through confrontation, but through example, conversation, and the patient work of building trust.

Research on social capital and political participation confirms something hopeful: active engagement in community groups — even those not explicitly political — builds the relational infrastructure that makes civic engagement possible. A conscience circle. A shared reading group. A monthly discussion of current events. These modest, friendly things are the actual building blocks of a community that takes moral responsibility seriously. You do not begin with a protest. You begin with a conversation and a pot of coffee.[86]

Let me offer a concrete vision of what such a community feels like. Imagine a place where the morning news is discussed rather than suppressed — where the hard story is not met with a nervous change of subject. Imagine a place where residents support one another's concerns rather than politely avoid them, where a neighbor's worry is taken up rather than waited out.

Imagine a place where a question like “What do we think about what's happening to children in these wars?” is welcomed at the table, not treated as an embarrassment. That community is livelier, warmer, and more alive than the pleasant silence it replaces.

A culture of courage runs on a few simple norms, and you can plant them: We don't shame each other for caring. We listen even when we disagree. We make room for the hard question. None of this requires a revolution. It requires a few people who decide to start — and then keep showing up.

Living With a Lighter Conscience

We have come to the end. And I do not want to close with one more demand — you have had a lifetime of those, and you have carried most of them without complaint. I want to close, instead, with an invitation. Not to activism. To wholeness.

So first, let me honor everything. Every reason you had for looking away. Every real limitation of body and heart. Every legitimate exhaustion, every fresh grief, every burden you were never thanked for. I honor all of it, and I do not pretend that engagement is easy, or that the weight of the world is yours alone to carry. It is not.

But I want to describe what it feels like to stop looking away — because I think you may have forgotten, and because it is better

than you remember. It is not the drama of the barricade. It is not a speech before a crowd. It is something quieter and deeper: the relief of alignment. The particular piece of a person who is living, even in the smallest ways, in accordance with what they actually believe. The three-in-the-morning heaviness lifts a little. The vague guilt loosens its grip. The self you have been missing returns to the room.

Researchers who study moral injury have found that its counterpart — moral repair, the process of acknowledging what happened and reorienting toward one's values — is associated with real improvements in mental health, in meaning, and in quality of life. And the principle runs in the direction we need: beginning to act in line with conscience, even late in life, even in tiny ways, restores something that suppression has been quietly costing us all along.[87]

So here is the closing image I will leave you with. Not a march. Not a victory. Just an elder at a window — aware of the school in Minab, aware of the children in Gaza, aware of the long silence that has been the default — choosing, just for today, to let that knowledge mean something. To say something to someone. To write one sentence. To refuse the particular comfort of not knowing.

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[87] Treatment for Moral Injury: Impact of Killing in War, PMC/NIH. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9078088/

That refusal is not a sacrifice. It is a return — to the person you have always, underneath everything, been.

The children are waiting. Not for a hero. Just for someone who refuses to look away.

Conclusions

1. The Trump administration has, in the past eighteen months, killed or enabled the killing of children in Yemen, Gaza, and Iran — with American weapons, American funding, and American political cover. These are documented facts, not partisan accusations.[88899091]
2. The silence of American citizens — including retirement community residents — is part of what makes this possible. Governments that face no accountability from their own citizens are more likely to escalate violence, less likely to

investigate abuses, and less constrained by the moral limits their own laws describe.[929394]

3. Apathy harms the apathetic. The health, well-being, purpose, and psychological integrity of older adults are all measurably better when they remain civically engaged. Staying silent about the killing of children is not restful. It is costly — at a level most people have not yet named.[959697]
4. Retirement community residents are not powerless; they are strategically positioned. Older adults vote reliably, carry moral authority within families and communities, and have, in most cases, more freedom to speak without professional consequence than almost any other demographic in America.[9899]

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[98] An Exploratory Study of Civic Engagement Among Older Adults, PMC. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7742221/

5. The smallest acts count. One honest sentence. One letter. One refusal to change the channel. Multiplied across a community, these constitute a moral voice — and a moral voice is what democratic accountability requires.[100]

Recommendations

For individual residents

- Begin with one act per week that moves from awareness to response.
- Say one true thing, in one conversation, about what is happening to children in these wars.
- Write to your congressional representative about civilian harm prevention — one sentence is enough to start.
- Refuse to decide that it is "not your problem." It is being done in your name.

For communities

- Establish a regular discussion group focused on current events and their moral dimensions.
- Invite chaplains, staff, and family members to take part in or support these conversations.

- Create visible space for conscience: a bulletin board, a newsletter column, a standing slot in the resident council for advocacy.

For families of residents

- Treat your elder's moral concerns as legitimate, not as agitation to be managed.
- Bring current events into your visits. Ask what your elder thinks about what is happening in the world.
- Support their engagement — write with them, call with them, show up with them.

For community leadership

- Recognize that a morally engaged resident community is a healthier one — for residents and for the institution.
- Create transparent channels for resident advocacy without fear of retaliation.
- Understand that suppressing resident voices is not only ethically wrong; it is associated with worse resident well-being outcomes.

For all of us

- Hold the image of the Minab school. Hold the image of a six-year-old girl arriving at school on a Saturday morning. Hold it as long as it takes for something to move in you.
- Then decide what kind of person you want to be for whatever time you have left.

This book was developed in 2026 using verified reporting from UNICEF, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the United Nations Office for Children and Armed Conflict, the Yemen Data Project, Airwars, the Pentagon Inspector General, Time, The Guardian, CNN, The New York Times, and peer-reviewed research in gerontology, moral psychology, and civic engagement.

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